



Review: [Untitled]

Reviewed Work(s):

Masculine-Feminine by Jean-Luc Godard

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der the guillotine. (Marat's seems to be black-and-white; not all the jokes are good ones.)

What is curious and remarkable is that this highly abstract work retains its power on film; its ideas are compelling, the doubts and anguish of its characters are moving, and its vision of the human condition is a large and tragic one. Richard Brook used a naturalistic surface in *Lord of the Flies* to convey Golding's thin allegory; here he has been content to give his theatrical imagination a free rein with Weiss's play, and capture the very rich and affecting results on film. In such extraordinary scenes as that in which the girl whips Sade with her hair, we are reminded that acting *as* acting can be as cinematic a subject as an express train; in the long, exhausting combat of Marat and Sade we are forced to recognize that talk can also be action, and photographable. Brook's experiment is not a great film, but it is a film which contains some important surprises.

—ERNEST CALLENBACH

MASCULINE-FEMININE

Director: Jean-Luc Godard. Script: Godard. Photography: Raoul Coutard.

Masculine-Feminine is a virtuoso display of technique, the epitome of Godard's style, of the new style; but that makes it no less fun, no less touching, no less emotionally engaging, both immediately and in retrospect.

In fifteen separate, discontinuous vignettes, he maintains the living incompleteness of a subtle, complex, simple love relationship, yet leaves us with an understanding that goes beyond defined classifications, a sympathy that is enlarging. Not that this is surprising, of course. No one—either on the current stage or in the film—has presented us with as varied and revealing a canon of love relationships as has Godard, and always with the distancing and jarring, the subversive playfulness of his style, his presence. (Compare, for example, the un-

explored matchstick figures, swamped by their surrounding scenery, in Lelouch's *A Man and a Woman*.)

This, however, seems to me Godard's most effective treatment of the difficult quest for love—for a number of reasons. For one thing, here the complexity of conception and means is kept within the situation, not superimposed on it. We see the two young people, Paul and Madeleine, directly, not as refracted through the juxtaposition of the conventions of old gangster movies (as in *Breathless* and *Band of Outsiders*) or of movies about making movies or the artistic process (as in *Contempt*) or of science-fiction, secret-agent movies (as in *Alphaville*). Witty and meaningful as those patterns usually are, they are a game beyond the raw material itself, not exactly distracting, but sapping, clever. In *Contempt*, for example, the lasting, telling moments are achieved, not by playing against the Ulysses myth and its art or against the Hollywood movie-maker myth, but by directly and audaciously following the ambiguously estranged man and wife as they wander and fuss about their apartment trying to know and say what is bothering them.

The Married Woman, it is true, had this same directness of focus, but not the depth or, most importantly, the variety of emotions, not the sympathy in the doing that is the key to *Masculine-Feminine*. *A Woman Is a Woman* had the directness and exuberance, but was slight—even basically empty, false. The most similar of his previous works was *Vivre Sa Vie*, with its discontinuous vignettes—each with its combination of visual imagery and verbal disquisitions—and with its equally honest and imaginative revelation of the ambiguities of character. Yet in comparison, its talk, although in perfect counterpoint to its situations and imagery, were nonetheless stagey, too obviously philosophical. And it was narrower in scope: it focused on the girl alone (who was not as interesting a person as Paul or Madeleine, more the personification of a conception). It maintained a monochromatic solemnity of tone, did not place the personal situation (as does *Masculine-Feminine*) in a meaningful context, a time and

place and mood, that have, at least in part, shaped it.

The importance of the social situation in *Masculine-Feminine* leads me to one last juxtaposition of my own. Godard here captures the current youthful scene—its energies and wonders, confusions and dead ends—that Antonioni much more ostentatiously and, for all his intelligence, much more obviously tried to come to terms with in *Blow-Up*. But Godard works at it from within, and from sympathy, not from the arch, impersonal and, I think, uncertain distance of Antonioni. For all of its thematic complexity, *Blow-Up* is a neat, tightly patterned, quick trip along the surface; *Masculine-Feminine* is a loose, impulsive, ragged immersion, full of the flow and flux of things, the way it is now for Paul and Madeleine.

Godard immerses us, and yet he keeps pushing us way, spinning us around, breaking the spell. This breaking up of the conventional patterns of narration, this breaking into the conventional illusions of film realism, this breaking away from the conventional sense of the film as a self-enclosed, autonomous package, finished and bounded—all of this is his trademark and already the new convention of the film. In Godard's work this new convention has had two major aspects. There is the attempt to suggest a more ambiguous, unbounded reality by shattering the consistency of the realism of motion picture photography, by producing a Brechtian alienation that emphasizes the theatricality, the artificiality of the collection of surface images as a parallel to the limitations of the surface appearances of "real life." But many of these same devices of alienation, when joined to his abrupt shifting and mixing of moods, tones, and emotions, also contribute to Godard's attempt to create with his films a worldly romanticism—a tangible liberation of consciousness and imagination for its own sake.

These two approaches to the film are particularly appropriate in dealing with the materials of *Masculine-Feminine*. These are young people who experience their lives as discontinuous, elliptical, as somehow only suggesting the full consciousness of themselves that lurks beyond

each tangible act, thing, situation. And yet they are young people with a great potential of consciousness, of imagination, of feeling, that is never realized and released. Their lives bear the very kind of discrepancy between inner and outer experience that Godard's techniques both grapple with and portray; they are revealed more by the dislocations of his structure and the mixing of his moods than they would be by any naturalistic sequence of cause and effect, action and reaction.

The dislocations of structure involve several interrelated techniques. The individual vignettes do not follow in clear causal or even temporal sequence; they are further interrupted by visual and verbal "intermissions" of the director. They often rise from omitted materials: exactly what Paul and Madeleine are angry over in the amusement-arcade sequence is never explained and doesn't matter. They often wander from and avoid central problems: Madeleine's pregnancy is mentioned but never the subject of a major confrontation or scene. They often appear to be digressive and irrelevant: Paul and his friend each brushing in turn the breasts of the girl in the bistro, Paul teasing the American Negro soldier. They involve static, undynamic interchanges rather than full dramatic confrontations: the constant question-and-answer sessions of all types. Or when they do conclude with a definite turn of plot, it rises suddenly and surprisingly from what precedes it: Madeleine's first sexual response occurs in the bed that she is sharing with both Paul and her roommate and follows her avoidance of him throughout the preceding scene.

From this welter of seemingly disparate elements emerges a feeling for, and the feeling of this boy and girl (both as representatives and as individuals) and their strangely troubled joys, their oblique, halting attempt at love. Their basic contrast is obvious, but the texture of its development is complex. Paul is the young intellectual, the idealist, the seeker; yet he cannot go beyond words, is not even sure what else there is; finally he gets lost in them. At his first meeting with Madeleine he reads her the polemic on the symbolic injustice of the

Army that he has been writing, yet he goes to work for a popular magazine and when tired of that, goes on to public-opinion surveying. This job turns his intimate, truly seeking questioning of Madeleine (especially in an amusing scene in the washroom that captures their awkwardness, isolation, and possibilities of openness with each other) into the cold, empty words of mass culture (as seen in the interview with the beauty-contest winner). His political concerns lead only to humorous but futile pranks: while he ironically questions the American soldier about the massacres in Vietnam, his friends paints PEACE IN VIETNAM on the side of the Army car; he begins to paint something about de Gaulle on the wall of a theater but stops when some workmen approach.

Madeleine is the eternally feminine, but also the temporally feminine, the plastic product of her times and culture. She is skimming a fashion and show-business magazine while Paul reads his polemic; she is constantly fixing her hair that perfectly surrounds her face like a protective helmet; she hopes to be a record star. Yet the beginning of her success as a singer gives her no full pleasure, leaves her still uncertain and unemotional. For all of her music and beauty and freedom she is uncertain of her emotionality, afraid of it, blocked from it, even more than Paul. In her woman's world Paul can hang around, but never fully enter. And if he could, he would only find that Madeleine, uninvolved and uninvolvable, is not really there, after all.

The groping, uncertain, finally hopeless ambience of their emotions is conveyed both by the contents and the mixed and shifting moods of the scenes. The scene in the bistro that marks the tentative overture to their relationship is suddenly interrupted by a violent argument between a man and wife, his sudden exit and her shooting of him, humorous in its bizarre surprise. The brutality, violence, and death that have become commonplace, banal in the life that surrounds the young people, but through which they glide unconnected, intrudes again and again. Each time the scene involves this kind of shocking black humor. While riding on

the Paris Métro, Paul and his friend witness a strange encounter between two Negroes and a white girl (a parody of Le Roi Jones's *Dutchman*) that ends in a shooting. At the amusement arcade Paul is suddenly confronted by a man with a knife who threatens him, then stabs himself. While Paul and Madeleine walk in the street, at odds over some vague tension between them, they are interrupted by a man with a can of gas who asks for a match. When he goes off with Paul's whole book of matches, Paul, on principle, goes after him to get it back, returns to tell Madeleine that the man has poured the gasoline over himself and lit it in protest against the war in Vietnam. Paul, the young idealist, is next seen conducting public-opinion surveys. Earlier, at the movies, while Paul and the roommate jockey for Madeleine's attention, they have watched a comically brutal erotic scene (a parody of Ingmar Bergman's *The Silence*), a scene that is a grotesque exaggeration of the inner silence, the cold physical limits of their own relationship. The girls have stared, repulsed but transfixed; Paul, the young man of principle, has rushed out to the projection booth to complain that the film is being shown at the wrong screen ratio.

The vignette in the amusement arcade can serve as a good example of the shifting moods and modes of narrative through the course of a scene. Paul and Madeleine are first seen dancing dispiritedly, then move to a coke bar. Paul tries to ask what is wrong, but Madeleine leaves, urged on by her roommate, who is a

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subtly subversive force in their relationship throughout, ambiguously fluctuating between feminine clannishness and lesbianism. "We've had enough of him for one day," the girls say. A caricature of a mod young couple come up to the coke bar, the homosexual-looking boy throws some coins on the bar and leaves. The baby-faced girl asks Paul if he wants to take some pictures. They go into a quarter picture booth and pull the curtain; we hear the girl offer to show her breasts for a fee, but she won't let him touch. Paul then goes into the next booth and makes a record for Madeleine. His imagination flows into a playful dream of their going away together and he describes the romantic scene at the airport, "Caravelle calling control tower, Caravelle calling control tower." Their futile yearning for connection, tenderness, communication is then given its poignant climax as he adds, "Paul calling Madeleine, Paul calling Madeleine." But the mood is abruptly broken as he wanders into the bowling machine arcade and watches a man bowling, only to have him threaten him with a knife and then kill himself.

The impasse of their relationship is itself abruptly shattered when the gratuitous horror of their surrounding world intrudes and Paul (as is described but not shown) falls to his death (suicide, accident?) from a balcony. Although thematically consistent, this seems, however, more of an intrusion of the director (with his taste for sudden climactic deaths) than an intrusion of life. The device is retrieved, however, by the perfect mood of the last scene as Madeleine, her face still enigmatically impassive, though now vaguely, uncomprehendingly touched by pain, is once more questioned. In response to the policeman's questions about what she will do now, she answers with the inconclusive mixture of seeking and hiding that has been hers throughout, "I don't know, I don't know." She has changed and not changed. We have come full circle and yet we are certainly not back where we started. Two lives (and our times) have been exposed on film, completely, incompletely. —ALAN CASTY

ACCIDENT

Director: Joseph Losey. Produced by Joseph Losey and Norman Priggen. Photography: Gerry Fisher. Art Direction: Carmen Dillon. Screenplay: Harold Pinter, from the novel by Nicholas Mosley. Editing: Reginald Beck. Music: John Dankworth.

"All aristocrats are made to be killed," says the Oxford philosophy don in the first few minutes of Joseph Losey's new movie, and his aristocratic pupil replies, "Of course, they're immortal." On one level, *Accident* is concerned with exploring certain myths of immortality, and with the durability of the romantic sensibility. The characters in the film feed on their own self-deceptions—each inhabits a walled enclave out of which he will occasionally timidly peek. It takes the accident of the title to smash the walls and spill these people out into the open air, where they gasp for breath, pathetically ill-equipped to deal with their own responses.

The film opens with a car crashing into the silence of an Oxford summer night. A student is dead in the wreckage, and a girl is helped out of the wrecked car by the Oxford don the couple had been coming to see. The accident is investigated, the girl vanishes into a bedroom of the house before the police arrive, and Stephen, the don, is left to cover for her. He elects to conceal her role in the accident. Most of the film is a flashback: Stephen's memories of his relationships with William and Anna, the two students in the car—and with his friend, Charlie, who becomes Anna's lover; with Stephen's pregnant wife, and with his former mistress. The film ends with Anna's departure from Oxford the morning after the accident.

English reviewers have called *Accident* Losey's simplest film, a fact they find praiseworthy. Actually, the film is extremely complex, but the absence of Losey's usual baroque surfaces leaves the impression of simplicity. The cool visual style may stem partly from Losey's choice of Carmen Dillon as art director instead of Richard MacDonald, who has worked on the more ornately detailed Losey films (*The Servant*, *Eve*, *Modesty Blaise*). The film is photographed in beautifully muted Eastman-color. The mood is pastoral, Georgian, elegiac.